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## Evaluation of Communication Methods in the Crisis Management plan of Kenyatta National Hospital

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**ABSTRACT:** This study evaluated the Communication Methods in the Crisis Management Plan of Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH). Many hospitals have challenges in mitigating crises because of inadequate and untimely communication. For this reason, many have suffered reputation loss and service disruptions due to public uproar. This study helped to determine how much communication methods in the Crisis Management Plan, are effective in crisis management. Case study design was used for this research. Key informants were selected using purposive sampling. Data collection methods were in-depth interviews and document analysis of both the Crisis Management Plan and Crisis Communication Plan of KNH. The key finding made following the evaluation of presented facts, is that as much as there is a Crisis Management Plan at KNH, a Marketing & Communication department, the CEO as the spokesperson, there is a deficiency in the communication methods applied during crises, leading to uncoordinated and slow crisis communication approach. The recommendations were thus to have a more comprehensive Crisis Management Plan for quick action, to utilize the Joint Operation Centre and the intranet and also mobile telephony for instant messaging which will aid prompt communication.

**Key words:** Crisis, Crisis Communication, Crisis Management

### I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is about transmitting opinions and attitudes, which can be done in oral, nonverbal or written forms (Murtadak, 2020). According to Amaresan (2019), crisis communication is concerned with the steps an organization takes in response to an incident, to ensure that all stakeholders are informed fast and in a consistent manner. According to Taylor (2020), a crisis is an unexpected time of danger or intense difficulty, a time of trouble and during which an important and crucial decision has to be made. It is a situation that suddenly arises and which can significantly affect the operations of an institution. It brings about physical, social, emotional, political and psychological trauma. Crises should be acted upon urgently so as to minimize damage and also to re-establish normal operations within the organization. Coombs (2010) notes that a crisis is as a result of an institution's threatened reputation. It is that which results when the opinions of publics have been altered due to an incident, which drastically affects an organization's performance. This is what contributes toward the disappearance of valued customers, which in turn interferes with the livelihood of the organization. According to Wasson (2019), a crisis creates an informational void that will be filled one way or another. When the company at the centre of the crisis takes too long to communicate, the void gets filled by critics.

A crisis takes place in three phases: Coombs (2011) elaborates on these three phases. The first phase, which is the pre-crisis phase, focuses on prevention and preparation. This phase involves locating and reducing crisis risks, maintaining vigilance and assessing threats to aid in decision making, also informing stakeholders about a potential crisis and thus building reputation. The crisis response phase deals with the crisis and how to communicate with the affected stakeholders, rebuilding an organization's or individual's damaged reputation. Quick response and credibility is key here. Coombs (2011) further notes that the post-crisis phase is concerned with preparation for the next crisis and aims to fulfil promises made during the crisis phase, updating stakeholders of continued efforts, including image repair. These phases are achieved by having a Crisis Management Plan that is updated and tested annually, a functional Crisis Management Team and also having the plan tested to ascertain its proper function.

Crisis management is important because it is concerned with how an organization coordinates and responds towards given crises, by making speedy decisions and communicating on time. (Grimmelt, 2017). A crisis management plan (CMP) has essential components. According to Thompson (2018), it is a reference

document in which key contact information is listed, communication methods and measures for disaster response are clearly stated. A CMP saves time throughout a disaster because tasks are pre-assigned. A good Crisis Management Plan has elements such as a Crisis Management Team, pre-drafted messages and a Crisis Communication Plan.

Crisis management in healthcare organizations is of great importance because crises pose lingering threats to the wellbeing of people. Healthcare systems according to Cristian (2009), are meant to address the healthcare needs of given populations. Various efforts have been made by governments, trade unions, charitable and religious organizations among others, to supply these needs. The healthcare system faces several types of crises: These can be accidents, surgical mishaps, suspicious deaths, and drug errors among other operation-related issues (Holmes, Kaufman and Pink, 2016). Levine (2016) posits that there are many opportunities for a remedy to go wrong, which may start from a physician, to a pharmacist, then to a nurse who will administer it and a mistake can occur anywhere along that chain. Communication is at the core of crisis management. Therefore, public hospitals need to minimize damage from crises by establishing ideal Crisis Management Plans with proper communication methods to avoid negative publicity that would disrupt operations (Moore, 2019).

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

According to The Kenya Health Policy (1994-2010) framework, Kenyatta National Hospital, which is at Level Six, is the pinnacle of the national healthcare system of delivery in Kenya (Muga, Kizito, Mbayah and Gakuruh, 2005). It is the largest public medical institution in the country and is mandated to attend to people's special health-care needs and services for referral cases. It also allows for scientific training and research activities (Ouko, 2012). Hence, it is a matter of public concern that the hospital delivers its services with high efficiency. Furthermore, being in an exalted position, it is expected to set the standard in healthcare, which other public as well as private health entities can emulate.

This notwithstanding, KNH has had few incidences which led to negative publicity in patient care and service delivery. For instance, between January and March 2018, it faced three major crises that were negatively covered by the media; head surgery done on the wrong patient, rape cases of new mothers and the stolen baby crisis (Masaviru, 2019). It was evident that during these crises and others that ensued thereafter, in spite of the fact that KNH has a Crisis Management Plan in place, there were communication challenges that led to public outrage and negative reputation of the institution. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the communication methods in the Crisis Management Plan of Kenyatta National Hospital in managing publicity.

### a. STUDY OBJECTIVE

The specific objective of this study was to investigate the communication methods in the Crisis Management Plan of Kenyatta National Hospital

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was mainly guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) According to Coombs (2007), it assumes that crises threaten the reputation of an organization. Therefore, it is important to assess the situation during a crisis and choose an appropriate communication response that can effectively handle the crisis. This will therefore depend on having an updated Crisis Management Plan with relevant contact list, well trained Crisis Management Team, pre drafting key messages and having a Crisis Communications Plan. A dark website should also be designed to be used specifically for doing crisis communication. Intranets, mass notification system/joint operation center should also be used to communicate with employees.

There are various communication methods used in crisis management, which are usually highlighted in the Crisis Management Plan (Wagstaff, 2019). In this study, communication methods refer not only to the channels of communication used during a crisis, but in which communication is done with and to all the stakeholders of Kenyatta National Hospital.

Crisis Communication Plans are meant to give steps which are easy to follow, in engaging stakeholders for proper communication (Weinhold, 2020). A detailed Crisis Communication Plan should clearly explain how the organization will carry out information dissemination. This includes, the steps that would be taken when handling both internal and external communication. It also stipulates pre-assigned duties and the tools to be used e.g emails, intranets, etc. Further, Cassling (2020) posits that in the Crisis Communication Plan, the spokesperson is clearly indicated, including the one who would step in, in case the spokesperson is not available. In addition, the contact information of all Crisis Management Team members, which includes personal cell phones should be indicated.

In crisis communication, the message should be tailored according to audience needs and be passed with swiftness. This is why it is important to have templates with pre-drafted messages incorporated within the Crisis Plan. This also helps to minimize communication failure (Wagstaff, 2018). Lockrey (2019) argues that pre-drafted messages aid in quickly accessing content without making much effort.

Landry (2018) posits that organizations need to focus on establishing a good rapport with the audience during a crisis. There are many ways through which this can be done. Agnes (2016) notes that to communicate with stakeholders in a crisis, it is important to identify the key stakeholders before engaging them. These stakeholders could include leaders, board members, customers, government, staff, investors, regulators, partners, organizations, shareholders, the media, vendors, trustees, the public and volunteers. Zemke (2020) posits that engaging stakeholders provides direction and clarity to during the uncertain and confusing times of crises. Strategic communication helps to stabilize the organization, increasing confidence and trust from the stakeholders.

The organization should accept responsibility whether the occurrence was an act of negligence or by accident. It can only exacerbate matters if the organization is finding excuses and covering up. The company should show the victims that they care, and that they are trustworthy, transparent and honest. Sincere apology should be done through a press release statement, video or through email, with sincere apology explaining measures the organization is taking in containing the situation (Thune, 2016).

According to Ink (2020), when there is a crisis, there is always negative media coverage that causes great liability to individuals as well as organizations, by posing a threat to the reputation, due to embarrassing news headlines and sometimes unnecessary lawsuits. For this reason, the media can never be ignored. The media will try to inquire about the crisis and journalists will reach out to anyone willing to give that information. This is why all staff members must be trained on what to say, should they be approached by the media. They should not decline to comment but instead, they should say that they are not authorized to speak on behalf of the company but can give directives to the contact person.

The use of Communication Technologies is an important communication method in crisis management. The social media sites should be monitored to find out what the public is saying about the organization. Social media platforms include twitter, Facebook, You tube e.t.c. If need be, a room/ press center should be set up whereby the Crisis Communication Team can work when addressing the media. It can be equipped with computers, a podium, office supplies, digital cameras, microphones e.t.c (Cassling, 2020). Another very important communication technology according to Hirsch (2015) is having a dark website. It is helpful to either have a section on the main website of the organization or have a separate website in which they will promptly communicate crisis issues. This is because there would be no time to create a website after a crisis strikes and inform hungry internet audiences in good time. Intranets are also important during internal crisis communication. Hall (2018) notes that the intranet is a platform for passing information to employees on a daily routine. This helps in fast information flow which is critical, especially where there is a crisis at hand. Further, intranets can aid information flow through fire emergency evacuation, quickly ascertaining the safety of the employees.

#### **IV. METHODOLOGY**

The case study research methodology was selected to evaluate the communication methods in the Crisis Management Plan of Kenyatta National Hospital. Kenyatta National Hospital is comprised of 53 main departments. The staff records from Human Resources for these departments was the sampling frame for the study. Whereas, more focus was placed on Disaster Management Committee and Communication departments because these two departments are directly concerned with crisis management, another ten departments that had been directly affected by recent crises were included in the sample. A sample size of 20 key informants was targeted but only 18 participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the informants. In-depth interviews were done using Interview Guides while Document Analysis was done using Content Analysis Code.

#### **V. STUDY FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

20 in-depth interviews were to be carried out for this study but finally only 18 informants agreed to be interviewed and as such, the response rate was 90%. 9 of the informants who agreed were members of the Disaster Management and Marketing & Communication departments, while the other 9 were from other hospital departments. This study also intended to conduct content analysis of two documents: Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and Crisis Communication Plan (CCP), which were availed to the researcher

In the bid to address the specific objective for this study, it was important to find out if the informants really understood what a crisis is. According to the researcher, all these informants clearly understood what a crisis means: as a sudden situation that affects an institution and which needs urgent attention. This agrees with what Taylor (2020) posits when he describes a crisis as an unexpected time of trouble that requires a crucial decision to be made so as to restore normalcy.

The researcher further moved to establish if the informants had ever encountered any crises within the organization and therefore were asked to name some of them. Upon further interrogation during the interviews, the researcher noted that all these crises named were recent because they happened between 2018 and 2020. Having confirmed that most interviewees understood and had ever experienced crises in their workplace, the

researcher was therefore confident that the informants had been making observations on how the hospital handles crises situations.

On the other hand, during content analysis of the Crisis Management Plan (CMP) of Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH), it was noted that the hospital acknowledges some of the potential acute crises likely to affect it, to include natural disasters e.g. earthquakes and floods, accidental crises like food poisoning and fires, technological crises that include system failure and communication breakdown. Other acute crises highlighted in the CMP include missing patients and staff misconduct that lead to damaging outcomes. This was commendable because the hospital already has a clear overview of potential crises and has designed a plan to handle them. This is in agreement with what Johal and Dean (2020) advocate for when they posit that developing an effective crisis management plan includes assessing and listing different types of crises that could disrupt the organization, including financial, organizational, personnel, technological and natural disasters.

Since the researcher had established that the informants understood what a crisis is and even experienced crises in their place of work, she moved to find out how communication of crisis was done at the hospital, during crises. The first step in establishing this was to enquire if there was a Crisis Communication Plan as part of the Crisis Management Plan of KNH. As such, the researcher asked informants from the Disaster Management as well as Marketing & Communication departments whether there is a Crisis Management Plan of KNH and whether a Crisis Communication Plan was part of it, its components and if they felt it was ideal for crisis management. What the researcher gathered from the responses is that those informants from the disaster management department were not aware of the existence of the Crisis Management Plan and the Crisis Communications Plan, while those in the Marketing and Communication departments were aware. Upon further interrogation, the researcher realized that there was a Crisis Management Plan and Communication plan as a separate document and these were availed to her for content analysis, at which point the researcher realized that KNH has a Crisis Management plan whose objectives are to reduce response time, help identify a crisis, increasing awareness and preparedness, enhancing employees and patient's safety, provide a coordinated effort in crisis management and foster improvement of crisis response (page 4-5).

On page 3 of the Crisis Communication Plan of KNH, it is stated that, "*Good communication is essential for the effective functioning of the organisation and to maintain a good reputation for delivering high-quality care.*" The Hospital therefore recognises that communication and engagement is a key part of its overarching governance framework to ensure the delivery of safe and effective patient care. For this reason, it acknowledges the role of a CCP in crisis management and hence to preserve reputation. This is also evidenced in the responses received from the informants who recognized the existence of CMP as well as its key role in crisis management. This is in line with what Cassling (2020) posits that a CMP ensures that an organization has an infrastructure in place to respond to crises ranging from natural to man-made crises.

Upon establishing whether Kenyatta National Hospital has a CMP, it was also important to further find out if the document was ideal for crisis management, having the required components. It was noted that on page 7 of the CMP, The Crisis Management Team (CMT) members are listed as comprising of representatives from Administration, Finance Corporate Services, Security and Safety, Marketing and Communication, Clinical Services Internal Risk and Audit.

According to the CMP, on page 7, the Crisis Management Team is headed by the CEO of the Hospital, who is the primary spokesperson during crises. In the absence of CEO, an appointee of the CEO will issue communication to the stakeholders, utilizing both internal and external resources to identify, analyse and respond to crises. The CMT has the authority to identify and designate a situation as a crisis, to determine the short and long term effects of a crisis event or situation, order the evacuation of the Hospital, work with the media and other stakeholders. The duties of the CMT are to analyse and assess crisis situation, determine emergency response strategies, allocate & direct emergency resources. It is noted on page 9 of the CMP, that holding statements are developed and shared with the media and other stakeholders, so that communication is clearly coordinated and they are updated when a crisis evolves. On pages 16 and 17 of the CMP, it is indicated that KNH has an intranet and website that are underutilized though.

The researcher concluded that with a CMT and the spokesperson in place, holding statements, communication technologies like intranet and website, it is guaranteed that the CMP and CCP are a good starting point for crisis management at KNH. This agrees with what Coombs (2007) advises that an ideal Crisis Management Plan should have a Crisis Management Team with pre-assigned tasks and also the spokesperson should clearly be indicated. Further, pre-drafted messages should be included as well as communication channels like dark websites, intranets as well as mass notification system on phones and emails.

Another communication method for effective crisis management is to formulate pre-drafted messages to be used when a crisis erupts. To find out if KNH indeed practice this, the researcher asked the informants if they have any pre drafted messages to be used in the event of a crisis and whether they deem pre-drafting messages as necessary for crisis aversion. Seven out of the nine informants responded by saying that there are usually no pre-drafted messages. Upon analysing the CMP of KNH, the researcher noted that on page 10, it is

indicated that holding statements would be shared with the media and various stakeholders, and would be updated when there is a crisis at hand. The researcher observed that most of the informants were not aware of these pre-drafted messages, probably because there are no pre-designed templates on the CMP of KNH. However, they were in agreement that pre-drafted messages would aid in prompt dissemination of information when there is a crisis at hand. This is in line with what Lockrey (2019) recommends that pre-drafted messages aid in quickly accessing content without making much effort because the crisis team will always simply add relevant information to the pre-designed templates.

Engaging the audience is another communication method during a crisis. On pages 12-13 of the Crisis Communication Plan of KNH, internal audiences are listed as staff, volunteers, students, lecturers, and specialists from the University of Nairobi. External audience are listed as the Government, partners, collaborators, relatives to patients and local residents. To find out if and how the audience is engaged, the researcher asked informants how they disseminate information to KNH stakeholders and how they engage them in the process of crisis management. Most informants mentioned a number of ways that the audience is reached during crises situations.

The researcher went ahead to check with the CMP of KNH. As indicated on pages 8-9 it was noted that engaging the audience takes place through the crisis activation steps whereby when a crisis happens, the Marketing and Communication department convenes, discusses then informs the CEO, who will then convene the Crisis Management Team to consult and thereafter the Marketing & Communication office informs the relevant stakeholders as they coordinate responses. This is done through phone calls, emails, physical meetings, employee designated desk, pre-approved patients' safety and assurance communication passed through senior medical staff.

On page 3 of the CCP, it is noted that the need to communicate and engage well with staff, the public, patients and partners is central to the success of the organization. The researcher therefore observed that KNH, through the Marketing and Communication department, is doing a commendable job in engaging its stakeholders during crises. KNH has clearly identified its stakeholders which is a good starting point in planning how best to engage them, in support of what Agnes (2016) notes that to communicate with stakeholders, in a crisis, it is important to identify them before engaging them. Tailoring messages according to the audience is important because each audience will understand a message and format that suits them. This is in line with what researchers Summerfield and Benninghoven (2006) notes, that when drafting key messages, the organization should think about what it wants to tell the audience because each audience will better understand the issue if key messages are tailored to their best interest. It is also commendable that KNH embraces digital platforms of engaging with stakeholders, which aid in the dissemination of information to many people at the same time, within a short time. This is in support of what Landry (2018) posits that the proliferation of digital and social media, stakeholders expect quick response to any arising issues because through technology, companies are capable of addressing them.

It is important to communicate with victims when there is a crisis at hand. This is another communication method. The researcher sought to find out how victims are engaged by asking the informants how the hospital communicates, shows concern and sympathy to victims when there is a crisis. Most informants were aware that the Crisis Management Team is trying their best to show concern and sympathy to victims who have been affected by the crises. They try their best to prioritize the needs of the victims, in support with what Landry (2018) recommends that that the victims' interests should be put first in times of crisis. Whether the company caused the problem or not, it should acknowledge the victims' pain, suffering and frustration.

Communicating with the media is a very important communication method since information is usually difficult to control, given that it spreads fast through media. The researcher endeavoured to find out how the media is engaged during crises. The researcher sought to check these sentiments on the CMP of KNH. They were confirmed on page 9, whereby it is noted that the CEO or the designated CMT leader is responsible for engaging with the media, in close consultation with the Marketing and Communication department. Based on the severity of the crisis, a media Information Centre is set to serve as the location of engaging with stakeholders. From the informant responses, as well as what is indicated on the CMP, it is clear that the CMT has the mandate of engaging with the media, under the guidance of the Marketing and Communication departments. This is in support of what Ink (2020) notes that the Communications team should be given the chance to take charge in drafting official statements to the media because it is their specialty.

Another important communication method is the use of communication technologies when disseminating information about a crisis situation. To find out which communication methods are used during crisis management, the researcher asked which communication technologies are used when engaging with stakeholders. From the informant responses, there are departmental WhatsApp groups that are used to pass information to employees, through their departments. Sometimes when necessary, departmental meetings are held to discuss crisis matters at hand. During these meetings, briefings are also done about how the employees should handle the situation. A part from that, circulars are also prepared for staff through which information is

passed. Daily emails that address ongoing changes, updates and progress reports during the crises are done from time to time. Phone calls are usually made to the head of units in case of information that needs to be passed. Pre-approved patients' safety and assurance communication is usually passed through senior medical staff, who also pass the same to staff within their dockets. Memos can also be used in passing information, as well as announcements done on the notice board. The hospital has a Facebook page that is also utilized to pass information through which the staff members can learn about a crisis situation.

The researcher deemed important to countercheck the informants' sentiments, with the CMP and CCP of KNH. On page 8 of the CMP, it is stated that communication will be conducted through phone calls, emails and physical meetings. On page 14 of the CCP, various communication tools are listed. These include posters, emails, intranets, screen savers, leaflets, press statements, patient letters, radio and notice boards. On page 16 and 17 of the CCP, KNH has both a Website and an Intranet which are not updated and hence underutilized. From the observation made, the researcher concluded that during crises at KNH, messages are passed across through various technological means, which are both traditional and digital. There is evident use of social media as a new technology as encouraged by Cassling (2020) who recommends the use of social media platforms like twitter, Facebook, You tube and also a room or press center which is set up for the crisis communication team to work when addressing the media. The researcher also observed that KNH utilizes the use of websites and press releases in agreement with what scholar Guizlo (2018) indicates that each crisis situation requires a unique response and therefore to prepare, the Crisis Management Team should create a template where information appropriate for each situation is filled. This could include sample press releases and website messages.

## VI. CONCLUSION

KNH has a Crisis Management Plan and a Crisis Communication plan as well. This is a good start in the bid to manage crises at the facility. However, there are no pre-drafted messages on the plan, to aid in prompt dissemination of information to stakeholders in case of a crisis, giving the impression that information is thus delayed. Contact numbers of the Crisis Management Team members are also not included and this may delay assembling them, since it may take time to look for the contact numbers when there is a crisis at hand. From the informant responses, stakeholders are engaged through physical meetings, calls, emails WhatsApp and even through Facebook. The media is also engaged through the Chief Executive Officer. On technologies for communication, KNH is yet to establish its intranet and website. However, the hospital uses other communication methods like memos, notice boards and emails, which may sometimes take too long to reach the intended audience, hence slow and uncoordinated communication.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) The study recommended that KNH should update pre-drafted messages and contact list on the Crisis Management Plan to aid in prompt dissemination of information and quick assembly of the Crisis Management Team.
- b) The study recommended that KNH should establish the Joint Information Centre to gather and disseminate important information that pertains to crises, to different management levels so that unified communication is done.
- c) The study recommended that KNH should update the hospital's intranet to aid in quickly disseminating information to the staff members.
- d) The study recommended that KNH utilizes mobile technology for instant updates through the crisis period, using short messages with acknowledgement function.

## VIII. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There needs to be further research on how to form smaller coordinated Crisis Teams, especially in a large organization like KNH. This is because during a crisis, it is not easy for a large Crisis Team to promptly assemble, and coordinate quick dissemination of information to all relevant stakeholders. It definitely has to take time. Therefore, further research needs to be done on how to coordinate smaller crisis management teams, harmonizing with the larger team.

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